

7 September 1966

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Elections in South Vietnam

SUMMARY

Since both the Viet Cong and the militant Buddhists are opposing the forthcoming constituent assembly elections, the extent of voter participation will represent an important test for the Ky government, and, to some extent, the US as well. Despite VC harassment and terrorism, a relatively honest election appears likely. A turnout of about 50 percent or better would represent a victory for the GVN and would be one more step toward providing a government with a popular mandate.

Even if the government emerges with an endorsement, the same political pitfalls and opposition would still exist. The assembly itself would create problems. There will be a danger that the assembly could become a rubber stamp for Ky and the military. Or might adopt a course unacceptable to the military (who will remain the ultimate arbiters for a long time to come) and thereby risk being suspended. It may be that it will bog down and accomplish nothing. On balance, however, it seems more likely that the assembly will eventually produce an acceptable constitution. If so, this would represent a significant step along the slow and often torturous path toward the creation of a government with a genuine national political base.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Since coming to power in June 1965, the government of General Nguyen Cao Ky has racked up a relatively impressive record. Foremost, it has survived, no mean accomplishment considering its many short-lived predecessors. It has

persevered against the same pressures which regularly brought down previous governments -- Buddhist opposition and military plotting. Moreover, the GVN, prompted by the US, has devalued Vietnam's currency -- a very much needed action, but one so fraught with danger that Ky's predecessors always shied away from it. Now the GVN is holding elections for a national constituent assembly, which is to have the task of drawing up a constitution. The GVN will have the power to veto items in the draft constitution, and a two-thirds vote of the assembly will be required to override the veto. Voting for the assembly is confined essentially to areas under GVN control, and slightly over five million people are registered to vote.

## II. THE SEPTEMBER ELECTIONS

2. The elections represent an important test for South Vietnam; the prestige of the GVN, its opponents, and, to some extent, the US is at stake. Tri Quang and his militant Buddhist following have called for a boycott of the elections. Although the militant Buddhists cannot count on automatic support for all of their ploys, some voters will probably stay away from the polls in response to the boycott, particularly in Hue area. Far more important, the VC are openly and actively trying to

disrupt the election through threats, terrorist actions, and even assassinations.\*

3. A relatively open and honest election appears likely, and the GVN is making a major effort to have a large turnout of voters. Although known and suspect Communists and extreme neutralists have been excluded from running or voting in the elections, the screening of candidates and the registration of voters has been conducted fairly. For example, many of the candidates, as well as voters, are highly critical of the Ky regime. The success of the elections, however, will be judged by the size of the voter turnout, not by which of the many competing candidates are elected. A turnout of less than say 40 percent of the registered voters would be a clear setback for the Ky regime; anything less than 30 percent would be a political disaster. On the other hand, a turnout of over 60 percent would be a significant vote of approval for the GVN and its policies; a vote over 70 percent would be a ringing endorsement. A large vote, moreover, would shatter the NLFV claim to represent the majority of the South Vietnamese people, although the Communists would attempt to lessen the blow to their image by crying fraud.

\* There have already been several hundred anti-election incidents attributed to the VC, including the bombing of several polling places.

4. Even a turnout of about 50 percent\* would represent a victory for the GVN and would be one more step toward a government with a mandate to rule. In the international arena, the GVN's image would be somewhat improved, despite efforts by the Communists and others to discount the vote.

### III. AFTER THE ELECTIONS

5. Assuming that the elections are at least moderately successful, Ky would have avoided one more pitfall and strengthened his leadership. It could not be assumed, however, that political harmony had been gained or that any marked change in the political situation was imminent. The VC, of course, would continue their struggle. Given a taste of political participation, many civilian groups would press for more. There would probably be a clamor for "real" elections and the rapid establishment of an elected government. And the militant Buddhists would continue to raise the cry for Ky's resignation or overthrow. In sum, the same opposition would exist as before the elections.

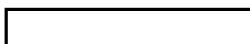
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\* In the May 1965 election voter turnout was almost 75 percent; however, the militant Buddhists were not in opposition and the VC chose largely to ignore the elections.

6. Once in session, moreover, the constituent assembly would inevitably start the political cauldron boiling. There would be some politicians who would press to turn the assembly into a national legislature contrary to Ky's expressed intention. The assembly would provide a forum for attacks against the regime. Ky and others within the military establishment might then be tempted to crack down and dictate to the assembly, thereby negating any gains from the elections. Finally, politics in South Vietnam are not overly developed, let alone cohesive; there is always the possibility that the assembly will simply bog down and accomplish nothing.

7. To avoid these possible adverse developments, Ky would have to exercise a deft political touch. And this will not be easy. Too much direction on the part of the GVN will make the assembly appear as a rubber stamp. This would confirm the suspicions of Ky's critics that he planned to perpetuate himself in power. Too little direction, however, would run the risk of the assembly adopting a course out of line with what the military, the ultimate arbiters in any case, would accept. This would increase the chances of the assembly being suspended or perhaps an outright military dictatorship being established. On balance, however, it seems more likely that the assembly would muddle through and eventually produce a reasonably acceptable constitution, although it might take a long time to do so.

8. Epilogue. In South Vietnam, any progress is noteworthy, and the Ky regime's political performance to date has been surprisingly good. If the September election is a success, the country's overall political situation will be improved. It will still be too early, however, to estimate if or when there will be representative government in South Vietnam. A more realistic index is whether progress is being made toward the creation of a regime in Saigon with a genuine national political base. Success in this endeavor could have an important bearing on what strategy the Communists will adopt, since the political prospect for South Vietnam is a vital ingredient in Hanoi's calculations.

  
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MEMORANDUM FOR: **The Director**

Attached is a memorandum which I think you will find interesting. It has been discussed by the Board. OCI, SAVA, and the DDP generally concur in the judgments in the memo.

**Sherman Kent**

8 September 1966  
(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101  
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

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